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BADLANDS SESTINA

By Emma Andrus

A summer unmoored in a barren land
of bones and gravel and sagebrush,
I wore a uniform and swept the air to dislodge the layer
of flies that had gathered in the echoing cement
latrines. Slow evenings, I spent dusk drinking beer under
an endless magenta sky.

Days and nights, I got lost in that sky
stretching one hundred and eighty degrees across the land,
cerulean fading to star-speckled indigo, I found myself going under,
mouth agape with its magnitude, a speck in the sagebrush.
I watched the thunderstorms roll in for miles, clouds churning like cement
mixing, ready to pour their load in humid layers.

Gravel turned to gumbo, building layers
of mud on my slippery boots as I worked. Days like that, the sky
lit up, fingers of electricity arcing through clouds, cementing
me in place, transfixed by the briefly illuminated land.
The following calm always caught the smell of rain-soaked sagebrush
dancing on the air, and the killdeer came out from under

the boughs of stunted prairie pines, under
which I found shade on sweltering days, hunkered on layers
of brittle, fallen needles. In the dusty air, the sagebrush
wore a halo of pale butterflies, wings' yellow contrast to the cloudless sky.
After summer's isolation, spent working an unpeopled land,
my feet forgot the feel of cement

sidewalks, so I cemented
my heart to the prairie, and buried it under
a leafless cottonwood tree, anchored in the parched land,
cracked like a sun-burn, peeling in layers.
I felt wide open, like the sky;
unrestrained, easy as a bluebird in the sagebrush.

Four hundred miles away, I dream the smell of sagebrush,
and a longing grows, hardening within me to cement.

Mountains edge the horizon, hemming sky,
casting long shadows that hold me under,
sun hidden in winter by inversion's bleary layers,
in the midst of all this asphalt, I lose touch with the land.

One day, like a bird, I will land in the sagebrush,
and when cool rains erode the layers of cement,
I will find the heart I left under the vast, dynamic sky.